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TAGS: PBTS MARR NATO PREL SR VI

SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER CHARTS COLLISION COURSE WITH NATO  
AND EUROPE

Classified By: Ambassador Michael C. Polt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (c) Summary: The DSS Kosovo platform released January 31 as the basis for coalition talks is further evidence that Kostunica is not likely to take a constructive path in the Kosovo status process. It also signals his willingness, just two months after the PfP invitation, to block or delay Serbia's budding relationship with NATO and its larger defense reform. The platform, which will raise the stakes for Tadic in cobbling together a working coalition government, raises questions about whether Tadic is strong enough and committed enough to keeping his vision of a Serbia moving towards NATO and EU membership on track. The Ambassador has urged Tadic to stand up for his vision and delivered a strong message to Kostunica on the potential impact of his stance on U.S.-Serbia relations. End summary.

¶2. (c) On January 31, the DSS made public its platform regarding its approach to the Kosovo status issue, and specifically highlighted the platform as the basis for any coalition talks with DS on forming a government. The platform is a reiteration of some of the least helpful positions of the Kostunica government over the past twelve months. It includes three principles: first, that the Serbian government will always regard Kosovo as an integral and inseparable part of the territory of Serbia; second, that the Serbian government would reject any recognition of Kosovo's independence by any state or international organization as "illegal, illegitimate and void," and would regard any such decision as having serious consequences on relations with that country or organization; and third, that acknowledgment of Kosovo's independence by any NATO member state would constitute a major threat to relations between Serbia and NATO, since the Serbian government would treat recognition as evidence that NATO had bombed Serbia in 1999 in order to seize the territory of Kosovo.

¶3. (c) Many of the elements of this platform have surfaced previously as official government statements or statements by Kostunica. Kostunica previously publicly threatened serious consequences to bilateral relations with any country that recognizes Kosovo independence, and Kostunica privately (and other officials publicly) have directly or obliquely stated that recognition of Kosovo's independence would be tantamount to an admission by NATO members that the 1999 bombing was "the first phase of NATO's invasion of Serbia" and a pre-meditated attempt to seize Kosovo by force.

¶4. (c) This platform significantly raises the stakes in negotiations for the formation of a coalition government. DSS has said publicly that acceptance of this platform is a prerequisite for DSS's participation in the next government. This will make it extremely difficult for Tadic and the DS to forge a more flexible and responsible Kosovo policy, at least in the next phases of the Ahtisaari process, as an intransigent DSS is a necessary partner for a "democratic" coalition. Unless Tadic is willing to counter Kostunica's brinkmanship, the president's maneuvering space on Kosovo

policy will be limited. To date, Tadic has shown no indication that he is willing to lead or take risks on this issue.

¶ 15. (c) This latest policy pronouncement from Kostunica exposes the PM's instinctive aversion to NATO and his suspicion of deeper defense cooperation with the West. The specific threat to relations with NATO as an institution in the DSS Kosovo platform - coming on the heels of Serbia's acceptance of an offer to join PfP - shows how low a priority relations with the alliance are for him. This approach is nothing new for the PM. It was Kostunica who put the brakes on a planned deployment of Serbian military personnel on a training mission to Afghanistan under the aegis of a Norwegian ISAF deployment and it is Kostunica's government (notably Stojkovic's Justice ministry) that continues to slow-roll implementation of the NATO GLOC agreement that the NATO SYG signed with FONMIN Draskovic in Belgrade in 2005. It was Kostunica who barely acknowledged the PfP invitation and chose somehow to interpret it as support for his position on Kosovo. It is easy to see Kostunica's fingerprints throughout Serbia's draft PfP Presentation Document, which highlights Kostunica's legal position on Kosovo and territorial integrity liberally and notes Serbia's intention to use the PfP consultative mechanism if its territorial integrity is threatened; and it was Kostunica himself who told the Ambassador in a private meeting in December - in strong and emotive terms - that he disapproved of the earlier visit of U.S. F-16 fighters to Batajnica airfield, noting it was "a mistake" and "too early" for the Serbian people to move on from the NATO intervention.

¶ 16. (c) Kostunica's willingness to make Serbia-NATO relations the first and most prominent victim of Kosovo

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independence, then, is not surprising. Tadic claimed credit for NATO's surprise announcement last December to invite Serbia to join PfP. He has repeatedly and forcefully claimed that Serbia's integration in NATO is his number one priority. He has actively courted parts of our defense establishment in Washington, Naples and Europe. He finally, after months of wavering, confirmed the appointment of a new reform minded Chief of the General Staff. He now faces a challenge. He will have to stand up to Kostunica's deliberate provocation on something he said is at the top of his priorities or fall back on his oft repeated statement that Kostunica and his DSS must be kept in the government lest he go to the radicals. It will take strong leadership from the president to avert such an outcome - leadership that has not been in evidence yet.

¶ 17. (c) Kostunica's reaction also makes it all the more important that Serbia's PfP presentation Document reiterate the assurances on Kosovo and ICTY that Tadic enumerated in his letter to the President on the eve of the PfP invitation.

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